

The Klosters  
Ephrata  
Lancaster County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-320

HABS  
PA,  
36-EPH,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

District of Pennsylvania 3

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Ralph W. Lear, District Officer  
139 S. Main St., Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

THE KLOSTER  
Ephrata, Pennsylvania

HABS  
PA.  
36-EPH.  
1-

Owner: In litigation (1907)

Date of Erection: 1744, et seq.

Architect: Community

Builder: Community

Present Condition: Fair

Materials of Construction: Mainly timbered, with clay and stone nogging between timbers. All weatherboarded over. Chimneys timbered, with clayed linings. Some stone. Some modern brick. Foundations stone. Almonry and kitchen walls stone.

Other Existing Records: As follows

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## THE CLOISTERS

### Ephrata, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

Ephrata Cloister, on the banks of the Cocalico Creek in Lancaster County, Pa., reaches out like a hand from a past when courage, brawn and an implicit belief in God moved thousands of men and women from Southern Germany, the Rhineland and Switzerland along a perilous path, where virgin forests had to be cleared, rivers to be forded and a multitude of unknown dangers to be faced, sapping the strength and will-power of those pioneer settlers whose descendants are today known as the Pennsylvania-Dutch. Only 140 miles from New York it stands today, a memorial to their piety and fortitude. The frugal lives, the wisdom and strength of character of these pioneers transformed Lancaster County into a farmer's paradise, unsurpassed anywhere on the Continent not only from an agricultural point of view but from that of cleanliness, and an inherent sense of honest work and all around integrity. Neither the discovery of gold or oil nor other easy access to wealth could deter them from their chosen path: To till the soil and sell its products honestly. Next to their own homes they built their churches and schools and lived in peace with their neighbors, be they fellow settlers or Indians.

#### Founded By Beissel

Ephrata Cloister was founded by Konrad Beissel, a baker from Ebersbach in the Palatinate (now Baden), where he was born in 1696, two months after his father, a heavy drinker, had died in the gutter. When 25 years of age, the future hermit of the Cocalico took to the road, touching Mannheim, Heidelberg and Strassburg, where he took part in secret conventicles of the Pietists, held in the solitude of the neighboring forests. At Schwarzenau, Westphalia, he joined Alexander Mack's group of Dunkers, a sect closely related to the Mennonites and Amish, believing in non-resistance, refusal to bear arms, simplicity of life and dress; they also refused to take an oath, accept public office or institute a law suit against their brethren and believed in baptism by submersion upon profession of faith (whence their name of 'Dunker').

Like the rest of the Dunkers, Beissel left Germany and arrived in Boston in the fall of 1720, accompanied by a few friends. He immediately set out for Germantown, Pa., where most of his co-religionists resided 'in much too worldly surroundings,' according to Beissel. His attempt to make a living by working as a baker failed because the good burghers of Germantown did their own baking, forcing him to work as an apprentice weaver for Peter Becker, preacher of the Dunker community there. He remained with Becker until the fall of 1721, when he struck out for the wilderness, accompanied by his friend Stunz, another Dunker.

It was less material dissatisfaction than religious scruples which moved Beissel along his path into the solitary life preceding the

Cloister's founding. The example of Johannes Kelpius, astronomer and mystic, who died in 1703 after years of the utmost self-chosen hardship and life in a cave on the Wissahickon, helped shape his determination to leave the 'worldly' burghers of Germantown and to become a hermit on the banks of Mills Creek, near the present site of Bird-in-Hand, Pa. Here he dwelled in a log cabin, previously occupied by the hermit Elimelech. Soon others were attracted to Mills Creek, among them Isaac Van Bebber, who induced Beissel and Stunz to visit with him the Labadist colony at Bohemia Manor in Cecil County, Maryland, where Peter Schluter (Sluyter) reigned with an iron hand. This trip to the Labadists strongly influenced Beissel and it can safely be said that he modelled Ephrata after the example of Bohemia Manor. This community, founded on August 11, 1684, never exercised the influence on colonial life its successor on the Cocalico did, and in 1742 the last participant in Schluter's monastic experiment died.

#### Rift Developed

Returning to his abode near Bird-in-Hand, Beissel preached in the neighborhood, developing his theories about Sabbath observance, substituting Saturday for Sunday as the day of rest and prayer. His dynamic personality, his innate ability as a preacher and his powers as a revivalist drew more and more adherents to his hut, much to the chagrin of the Dunkers, who objected to his Sabbath theories as well as to the thinning of their ranks and subsequent loss of their prestige. Soon a serious rift developed, charges and counter-charges flew, climaxed by Beissel's book about the Sabbath (written in German, 1728), setting forth his reasons for leaving the fold of the Dunkers and laying the spiritual foundation for the Seventh-Day-Baptist-Society and thus for the Ephrata Community. Again Beissel drew away into the wilderness, this time moving to the present site of the Cloister on the banks of the Cocalico, accompanied by a few adherents. Slowly others followed, among them unmarried women who, at first, were rejected but later on obtained permission to settle in huts across the creek. In a few months the tract was dotted with log cabins and became known as the 'lager' or camp. In 1735 the monastic idea was definitely transformed into reality when the first cloister building went up. Thus an experiment started which is unique in American history.

'Ephrata' (taken from Ruth 4-11) was governed without a written covenant, the New Testament being the only law and means of church discipline. There was no individual property and all income was derived from donations and communal labor, be it farming, book printing, the manufacturing of pottery, cloth, lumber, or educational efforts open to secular students. The Cloister soon became the center of industrial and intellectual activities for miles around. In 1740 a Sunday school, the first one anywhere, was added to the educational efforts of the Cloister, whose other school and training facilities drew students from cities as far away as Baltimore and Philadelphia. More and more buildings went up and at the height of its development nearly 300 nuns, monks and families

participated in the rigid life of the community. Celibacy was not strictly prescribed, although there were attempts to model the routine somewhat along the lines of Catholic monasteries with tonsure and monastic names for both sexes. Whatever the motive, celibacy did not win out and married couples, called householders, were permitted to live on the cloister grounds in separate buildings, some of which are still in existence to this very day.

#### Wrote Own Hymns

Instrumental and choral music prospered, Beissel and others composing their own music and writing their own hymns. Their offerings in this field became widely known and admired, so much indeed, that the English court sent a commission to the Community to find out more about its work, particularly in the field of music. Their report at the Court of St. James must have been a favorable one, because we learn of a gift box sent to Beissel by the Royal Family, the contents of which were kept a secret, even after he and his aide, Peter Muller, had buried it in the ground, 'lest the mark of kingly favor should foster pride and worldliness in their cloister.' The ascetic men and women of Ephrata dealt in a similar way with an offer for five thousand acres additional land by their friend, Governor George Thomas, because 'it was injurious to their spiritual life to accumulate much property.' Musically educated brethren went about the countryside, teaching vocal and instrumental music to their neighbors. Hundreds from near and afar made pilgrimages to the Cloister to find spiritual peace radiated by the saintly nuns and monks and to listen to their inspiring music, an experience nowhere to be duplicated in the colonial America of that day.

Benjamin Franklin printed several books for the Community, all of them of a religious nature. Copies bearing the years 1730, 1732 and 1736 as the date of the publication, are still in existence. Between 1736 and 1739 Germantown's famous publisher, Christopher Saur, became the Cloister's printer. Difficulties developed between him and Beissel when Saur's wife abruptly joined the Ephrata Community, leaving her bewildered and distracted husband to his printing press and other interests. This episode, together with a desire to make the Cloister wholly independent from the world about it, caused the monks to set up their own printing press. In 1748, after smaller works had come off their press, the Brethren surprised their doubting competitors by the publication of the 'Martyrer Spiegel,' the most conspicuous undertaking in book-making of the colonial period, comprising 1,514 pages of a story about the Mennonite Martyrs of Europe, and their terrible punishment at the hands of the authorities. It took fifteen monks three years to complete the work. Nine worked in the printing office; of these four were composers, four pressmen, one translator from Hollandish into German, the rest being employed in the paper mill and book bindery. The larger part of the edition of 1,300 copies was sold at the pre-arranged price of twenty shillings to their Mennonite customers. By an irony of fate, the unsold copies of the

'Martyrer Spiegel' were confiscated by Washington's soldiers to envelope the powder and balls that were fired into the faces of British soldiers at Brandywine and Germantown. About forty more books came from the Ephrata press, indeed a most remarkable contribution to the spiritual and educational life of America.

#### First Red Cross Activity

Ephrata Cloister bears another distinction which also brings it to the front among the hallowed memorials to America's past. After the battle of the Brandywine in 1777, Washington asked and was readily granted permission to transport about five hundred wounded and sick soldiers to the Cloister, where the greater part of them were nursed back to life by the devoted monks and nuns. Many of the soldiers and their nurses died, their worst enemy having been typhoid fever. A monument on the Cloister grounds with inscriptions in both English and German marks their common grave. This organized effort to care for the wounded and sick soldiers on such a scale is considered the first Red Cross activity on American soil, three-quarters of a century before Florence Nightingale.

Today Ephrata Cloister is but a silent reminder of a unique economic as well as religious experiment. Legal difficulties so far have prevented a restoration of its buildings, although the State of Pennsylvania has already appropriated ten thousand dollars for badly needed repairs. The U. S. Works Progress Administration is also eager to do its share to save the Cloister from an ignominious fate. Let us hope that legal technicalities will not prevent the preservation of this irreplaceable monument to colonial craftsmanship, patriotism and the dauntless spirit of Pioneer Pennsylvania."

From Unidentified Publication.